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Diplomacy Must Prevail in Israel-Hizbollah Conflict

Thus far, Hizbollah and Israel have avoided a disastrous escalation on the Israeli-Lebanese border as the Gaza war rages. But trouble lies ahead. Western-led mediation remains the best way to restore security to the frontier.

The latest round in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has ushered in a new phase in the long-running standoff between Israel and Hizbollah, the powerful Shiite militia-cum-party in Lebanon. For seventeen years, mutual deterrence helped preserve a shaky calm, but since 7 October, daily rocket fire and drone attacks across the border have raised the spectre of all-out war. Whether or not the two sides manage to forestall such a near-term escalation, trouble lies down the road: Israel has made it clear that, after Hamas's 7 October attack on communities ringing the Gaza Strip, it will no longer tolerate Hizbollah's presence on its northern frontier. The exchanges of fire to date have prompted Israel to evacuate as many as 100,000 residents from the north, creating strong public pressure on the government to take steps that would allow them to return in safety.

Against this backdrop, Israeli leaders are demanding enforcement of UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which, in ending the Israel-Hizbollah war in 2006, required armed non-state

actors like the Shiite militia to remain far away from the frontier. But in threatening unilateral military action, Israel is heightening the risk of an accelerated escalation that would be difficult to control, and which could leave swathes of southern Lebanon and northern Israel in ruins, all without making it safer for Israelis with homes in the area to resume normal life. Western diplomats are exploring initiatives that might smooth tensions and open room for the parties to restore security to the border. These are worth developing, but they are at once long shots and unlikely to gather steam until the parties to the conflict in Gaza reach a desperately needed ceasefire.

Conflict after Calm

Hizbollah entered the fray 24 hours after Hamas's 7 October massacre, with a strike on an Israeli position in Shebaa Farms, a tiny area occupied by Israel, to which Lebanon and Syria both lay claim. Over the first few weeks, the fighting spread from Shebaa Farms to a wider – yet still confined – strip of land some 5km deep along both sides of the border. The territorial scope and intensity of hostilities increased gradually into mid-November, rising further after the eight-day "humanitarian pause" in Gaza, which was also observed on the Lebanon-Israel border, ended on 1 December.

While Hizbollah has stepped up its attacks, they are nowhere near what the group is capable of, suggesting that it is engaged in a bit of a balancing act. On one hand, it seems to have calculated that it could not afford to stand aside entirely, as defending Palestine and supporting its allies in the "axis of resistance" – a group of Tehran-backed states and militias, including Hamas – are key elements of its ideological and strategic posture. On the other hand, Hizbollah, along with its patron and supplier Iran, seems keen to preserve the military assets it has acquired – a key element of Iran's defence strategy against potential Israeli aggression – rather than burn them on the altar of saving Hamas. (Hamas reportedly gave neither Hizbollah nor Tehran prior notification of its operation.) Moreover, the United States has explicitly warned Middle Eastern actors not to attack Israel; it deployed two aircraft carrier strike groups to the region in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks, signalling Iran and its allies that if they were to enter the war on Hamas's side, they might end up facing the U.S. directly. Tehran is not interested in such a confrontation. As for Hizbollah, it has offered less than full-fledged support for Hamas, pushing the line that it does its part for the axis by tying down Israeli forces in the north.

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which they created a set of unwritten "rules of the game" that, as long as they were followed, would prevent a massive escalation by either side. Most importantly, Hizbollah and Israel aimed to restrict the fighting to the remote, uninhabited Shebaa Farms and the vicinity, minimising the risk of civilian casualties, and to calibrate their fire to keep the conflict within acceptable limits.

The quiet period did see jockeying for position. Hizbollah chipped away at the key premise of Resolution 1701: that no one other than Lebanese state bodies should bear arms south of the Litani river, which runs roughly parallel to the border between 5 and 30km to its north. Even before the 7 October attacks, Hizbollah's presence in border areas had become blatant, and the frequency of skirmishes was ticking up. Israel also chalked up its share of infractions of Resolution 1701 through persistent violations of Lebanese airspace and continued occupation of Lebanese territory in the northern part of Ghajar, a border village whose southern half lies inside the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Nevertheless, for most of the seventeen-year period that came to an end in October, residents on both sides of the border enjoyed a stability unknown since Palestinian guerrillas first launched cross-border attacks on Israel from Lebanon in the early 1970s. As recently as mid-2023, Israeli strategists interviewed by Crisis Group were displaying high confidence that Israel had deterred Hizbollah from starting a major disturbance. Yet some expressed concern that it was a question of when, not if, Israel would feel compelled to act pre-emptively and take out part of Hizbollah's growing arsenal of advanced weaponry.

If the conflict in Gaza comes to a close, Hizbollah might well stop its cross-border attacks, as it did during the "pause" between Israel and Hamas in late November. From the group's perspective, and from Iran's, the Gaza war's end would render obsolete the rationale for supporting Hamas by opening an additional front. But Hizbollah shows no inclination to reset the status quo so that it conforms to Resolution 1701, which is precisely what Israel insists on.

How Israel Sees Its Options: "1701 or 10/07"

Since 7 October, Israel has undergone a dramatic transformation in how it sees its neighbourhood. Israeli politicians, as well as the residents displaced from the border areas and many others who live just to the south, now describe Hizbollah fighters' proximity to the border as a threat more lethal than Hamas in Gaza. In May, Hizbollah's elite Radwan unit staged a military display – including mock cross-border raids – that advertised preparations for a possible attack on Israel using tactics that now look eerily similar to those employed by Hamas on 7 October. Widespread concern about an actual incursion has created intense public pressure on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's embattled government to bolster Israel's capacity to prevent cross-border attacks from Lebanon at the earliest opportunity.

Israel has signalled that failing successful diplomatic efforts to secure Hizbollah's compliance with Resolution 1701 – ie, to get the group to withdraw its fighters from areas south of the

Litani as that resolution stipulates – it will rely on its military to force the issue. Beyond pointing to the letter of the resolution, Israel has justified its demands by arguing that, without a proper security buffer in southern Lebanon, it will be unable to prevent surprise incursions across its northern border. In the public debate, this option has crystallised into the slogan: "It's either 1701 [Hizbollah removed from the border] or 10/07 [a similar disaster waiting to happen]". Israeli officials have suggested that countries like France with channels to Hizbollah press this point with their interlocutors in the group.

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But such efforts, in particular by French envoys, have so far failed to convince Hizbollah to comply with Resolution 1701's provisions or, short of that, to pull back several kilometres from the border. Officially, the party refuses to engage in conversation about future security arrangements in the south as long as the Gaza war continues. Privately, interlocutors with links to Hizbollah rule out any arrangement that would, in effect, limit Hizbollah's access to the border, unless the Israeli army were willing to accept similar restrictions. As one former high-ranking Lebanese official said to Crisis Group, "In practical terms, Resolution 1701 has been abrogated". Continued refusal by Hizbollah to comply with 1701's withdrawal requirement may prompt Israeli decision-makers to see intensified military action as the only available option for providing security at the border.

While in theory, the Security Council might be a place to address the unravelling of one of its resolutions, in practice it is unlikely to serve that function. Diplomats in New York rule out modifying Resolution 1701 to confer enforcement powers on UNIFIL, the 10,000-strong UN peacekeeping cohort in southern Lebanon, which is not currently authorised to use force in fulfilling its mission. For one thing, China and Russia are adamantly opposed to the idea of changing the role of UNIFIL, which is tasked to assist the Lebanese government. In August, in the most recent annual vote on renewing UNIFIL's mandate, they abstained over language that they claim infringed on Lebanese sovereignty by emphasising UNIFIL's freedom of movement. Any draft resolution aimed at investing UNIFIL with a coercive role will run up against their veto.

For another thing, even if such a change could be authorised, neither the Lebanese state nor UNIFIL is sufficiently powerful to impose its will on Hizbollah. Even though Lebanon is bound by Resolution 1701, and Hizbollah is a Lebanese political party, the group refuses to submit its foreign policy decisions to the state's authority. Nor can the state compel it to do so, even by deploying the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), given Hizbollah's fighters under arms – the party claims to have ranks numbering 100,000 – who answer only to the party leadership. Hizbollah also has substantial representation in the country's political institutions. As for UNIFIL,

diplomats representing troop-contributing countries clearly show awareness that giving it an enforcement role would put their nations' soldiers in severe danger.

Some Israeli officials therefore say the most likely scenario, for at least the near term, is an extension of the actions Israel is already taking. Under this scenario, Israel would continue to push through diplomatic channels for compliance with Resolution 1701, even as it raises military pressure to make clear its price for calm: Hizbollah's withdrawal to a satisfactory distance from the border. Fighting would follow the pattern that has emerged since 7 October: strikes on Hizbollah assets in the area south of the Litani that remain below the threshold of severe escalation, with the objective of gradually degrading the group's military capability to an extent where it ceases to be a threat.

Proponents of this approach express confidence that, during the fighting in the past two months, Israel has already destroyed most of the infrastructure that Hizbollah had built in southern Lebanon to prepare for incursions, such as observation towers and command posts. Since Hizbollah was present at the border for most practical purposes already before 7 October, they argue that once the fighting stops, the security situation will already be significantly better than before and the danger of incursions lesser. This, in their view, suggests that attacks aimed at preventing Hizbollah from rebuilding through targeted hits on key operational infrastructure could remain limited enough to avoid triggering a massive escalatory response. This approach would closely resemble the "campaign between the wars" – the low-intensity and often covert operations that Israel has conducted to prevent Iranian military entrenchment in Syria.

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But while more of the same may appear to be the most intuitive path for Israel, it simply may not work. The main problem is that it is not clear when, if at all, the present campaign will make northern Israel sufficiently safe for the displaced to return home; indeed, it could have the opposite effect. There is precedent for creating a no man's land at the border between Lebanon and Israel. From 1978 to 2000, Israel occupied southern Lebanon in connection with its 1978 and 1982 invasions aimed at driving Palestinian militants out of the country. In the mid- and late 1990s, when fighting heated up in the "security zone" that the Israeli army maintained in southern Lebanon with the help of a Lebanese proxy militia, Hizbollah often showered northern Israel with rockets, bringing daily life to a standstill.

Thus, if past is prologue, rather than allowing residents to return, the indefinite extension of Israel's current approach may well end up making northern Israel unliveable. Indeed, the consequences could be more severe this time, given that Hizbollah has built up a far stronger arsenal than it had more than two decades ago. Meanwhile, critics of such a campaign worry

that it will inevitably leave space for Hizbollah to remain deployed near the border and rebuild its infrastructure, albeit at a slower pace than it was fortifying its positions before the war. None of this is likely to be satisfactory to those who have been displaced from northern Israel, some of whom argue that the border area has already become a de facto "security zone" – an uninhabitable region that creates a cordon between the rest of the country and Hizbollah. This suggests popular pressure will build for the Israeli government to take more aggressive, and therefore escalation-prone, military action.

Should Israel decide to up the ante militarily, the risks would be alarming indeed. Certainly, an Israeli ground invasion that seeks to create a buffer zone in southern Lebanon – or a bombing campaign that tries to render the area uninhabitable by Hizbollah fighters – would take a terrible toll on the civilian communities in which the fighters are embedded. It could prompt a reaction that spirals out of control. Such a conflict would be catastrophic for Lebanon, which is reeling from a disastrous economic crisis that has lasted for more than four years, and already struggling to cope with more than 50,000 civilians displaced from the south. Meanwhile, Hizbollah's missiles and drones would also cause extensive damage in Israel. Furthermore, a serious threat to Hizbollah's survival could push Iran and its allies to leap to its defence, sparking a regional war and potentially drawing in the U.S. Concerned about this prospect, Washington has already performed an important braking function, with news reports suggesting that top officials have warned Israeli counterparts to avoid a large-scale escalation in Lebanon. It will probably try to continue playing this role, not least to prevent the U.S. from being dragged into a wider conflict.

Searching for an Off-ramp

Western diplomats concerned with the border file admit the difficulty of finding a political solution that would meet Israel's security demands. So long as the war in Gaza continues, it is hard to see Hizbollah backing off its current posture, much less engaging in conversations about security arrangements. But even once that conflict is over, the group will likely decline to make formal commitments, even through mediators, to a country it does not even recognise. Nor does the Lebanese government have the capacity to undertake, let alone guarantee, such commitments on Hizbollah's behalf.

Even when the fighting in Gaza has ended, these factors will make it difficult for the parties to find their way back to the relative calm of 2006-2023. The "rules of the game" that prevailed then took shape over time. They began with passage of Resolution 1701 but were in fact based on tacit understandings that both Hizbollah and Israel had an interest in upholding. Those understandings took years of intermittent clashes and lulls to develop. But with that framework having largely collapsed – and with Israel insisting on an iron-clad security guarantee that Hizbollah is unwilling to give – there is no apparent foundation for rebuilding or replacing it.

Against this backdrop, outside actors are exploring whether there might be ways to encourage better compliance with Resolution 1701 without running up against Hizbollah's outright

resistance. High on the list is additional support for the LAF, which has been hard hit by Lebanon's financial meltdown and the subsequent currency devaluation that has made state salaries nearly worthless. As noted, it is unrealistic to expect the LAF to strong-arm Hizbollah – any such attempt would likely precipitate its disintegration or even civil war – but a larger LAF deployment would make Hizbollah's presence less conspicuous and enhance the presence of the Lebanese state, both key conditions for any future security arrangement. At the same time, Hizbollah has long had good relations with the Lebanese army, so it may not object to an expanded LAF presence in the south, as that could be portrayed as strengthening Lebanese sovereignty in the area. Joint LAF-UNIFIL patrols, as recommended by the Security Council in August, when it renewed UNIFIL's mandate, would also allow the UN peacekeepers to regain credibility among residents of the south. Until recently, UNIFIL was hampered in its operations by suspicions among the population that it was passing information to Israel – a distrust that Hizbollah has previously encouraged.

Western countries have floated the idea of opening talks about demarcation of the Israel-Lebanon frontier.

Other suggestions are less focused on the Resolution 1701 regime and more on creating a better diplomatic atmosphere in general. For example, Western countries have floated the idea of opening talks about demarcation of the Israel-Lebanon frontier and resolution of some of the thirteen disputes over territory along the Blue Line, the approximation of the border drawn by the UN in 2000. Israel and Lebanon do not have diplomatic relations, but the talks could follow the format used for the historic 2022 maritime border agreement, which relied on shuttle diplomacy conducted by a U.S. mediator. Rather than trying to strike a specific deal around security arrangements, the idea would be to change the subject entirely – encouraging the parties to shift focus away from the logic of military confrontation toward the logic of diplomatic engagement by opening such talks. As one diplomat put it, "Once you have a process that looks like it may go somewhere, it may be a disincentive to look for a solution on the battlefield".

These efforts cannot realistically go anywhere until there is an enduring ceasefire in Gaza to remove the motive for Hizbollah's recent burst of belligerency; and, even then, they seem like long shots – worth nurturing but hard to bank on. Until a ceasefire happens, it will be especially important for those with influence over the parties to hold them back from going over the brink. Tehran and Hizbollah should be conscious that brinksmanship in these circumstances has enormous risks: an errant missile that kills a significant number of civilians could light a fuse that cannot be unlit. As for Israel and its sponsors in Washington, if they wish to create an option for displaced Israelis to return safely home, then they need to do what they can to avoid escalation and preserve the potential for a political solution down the road. Israel has the right to seek security for its citizens, and it clearly will not accept a reality in which tens of thousands

of residents remain indefinitely displaced. But attempts to impose a unilateral security regime on southern Lebanon – like Israel has in the occupied West Bank and now Gaza, where the threat is smaller – are unlikely to solve anyone's problems and will almost certainly throw fuel on an already dangerous fire.

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